

THE BLUE BOMB

BY J. V. GIESY

"A Story Of Humor, Mystery, Romance, and Adventure"

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Gafford shot her a glance of admiration and laughed. "Bully!" said he and took the weapon. He seized her arm and led her quickly to the street and along it a ways to the door of the curio store where she had shopped. Even in those few steps she noticed his limp.

"Are you injured?" she asked as they paused. "Did he hurt you—that dreadful little man?"

"Not yet," Gafford returned with another laugh. "I had my foot cut the other day. It is practically well, but tender. You stop at the Nippon, I think. We would better return there without delay."

"You mean we are not yet out of danger?" said Miss McRae.

"It is well to play safe," returned Gafford. "Yamata is rich. He is a power in his way, with extensive financial interests, and government pull. People can be hired to do strange things in this country."

Miss McRae's face flushed. "I've acted like a fool and caused you to make an enemy of my account. I am sorry, and deeply grateful. I shall always thank God that I met an American gentleman when I was in danger."

"You must be careful how you go about in this place," Gafford cut in almost shortly. "It isn't like your country—women aren't safe. I shall call a rickshaw. There's an empty one up the street a ways. Shall we walk up there?"

"She nodded, and they set off. Presently she broke the silence. "Don't you want my thanks, Mr. Gafford?" he supplied as against his will. "I value your thanks above all things, Miss McRae; but the service was nothing more than any white man would render a woman in danger. Please forget it, save to let it make you more careful in going around."

"Still," said the girl as though of some set purpose. "I'm glad it was a countryman of mine who saved me from my folly."

Gafford flushed slowly; then as by an effort: "I am not an American, Miss McRae."

"Australian?"

"I have no country, Miss McRae," he replied after a painful moment. He signed to the rickshaw boy.

"Oh—," Shieila McRae caught her breath as she took his hand to step into the rickshaw. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Gafford. Will you forgive me, and come to see me at the hotel, where I can thank you more fully than here?"

"You are very kind," he made answer. Then he laughed. "What's the use of pretending, Miss McRae, he burst out in an irony that was bitter. 'The clothes I stand in are as good as any I have. One does not call upon a lady at the Nippon in rags.'"

The girl's blue eyes looked full into his. "It was the man I was asking to call," she told him. "Please come." She put out her hand.

Gafford waved. "Perhaps," he said in the tone of good-by.

"Good-by," Shieila told him. Her face was almost wistful.

ing, is—I'm not full of the stuff. Well, then; listen."

He plunged into an account of the affair in the inner room. White Kate giving eager attention, drank in every word. Her eyes began to glisten and sparkle as he went forward. At the end she laid a hand on his knee. "That was fine, Gafford," she exclaimed. "The little beast! That was the sort of game he was trying to pull in my house, was it—doped tea and a rickshaw waitin' in the alley? I wish you'd killed him, the yellow shrimp! I'd have liked to see you in action, boy. Oh, Gafford, why don't you take a brace and be the man you could be?"

"Oshitu in town," said Gafford with apparent change of subject.

But Kate understood. Her head came up and she looked him in the eye. "The man who wrecked you, Gafford? Would there be any chance to get anything on him—to prove you didn't do it—the thing they accused you of?"

"I don't know. I've been wondering—half way," he answered slowly. "I wish you'd see if you can find out anything about what he's doing. I know he's up to something. He'll likely drop in here with this Yamata. They're hunting in couples. I've found out that much. It was Oshitu who cut my foot."

"Oshitu?" gasped Kate. "My God! what for?"

"He wanted to see if I was asleep," said Gafford with another grin.

Kate gave him a narrow-eyed glance, which said as plain as words that she recognized the evasion. She breathed somewhat quickly. "Can you pass the opportunity, Gafford?" she asked, with a breathless interest in her tones.

"I don't see how I can," he responded slowly. "Yet after five years what can I do—what chance—to connect things up? Besides—with a change of tone—I've something else on my mind just now. That girl asked me to call on her."

"Little fool," muttered Kate. "Quite right. I agree with you," said Gafford.

Kate put out a hand. "I didn't mean that, Gafford, and you know I didn't. I suppose you want to go? It's quite romantic in a way."

Gafford swept his hands outward and down. "In these rags?" he jeered.

Instead of laughing, Kate grew serious. Suddenly she rose. "Wait," she commanded, and left the room.

When she returned she carried a white suit over her arm. "Here," said she as she tossed it down on the couch. "A Frenchman wore them last, but he was about your size. He got into a fight and was knifed. He died here some years ago. When they took his body away they left the suit. Try it on while I'm gone."

She turned again through the door. Gafford put on the dead man's clothes. Kate had been right. They fitted him trimly. They seemed to be some sort of fatigue uniform of the French navy from which the insignia of rank had been cut. Gafford, surveying himself in Kate's glass, stiffened into unwonted erectness as the reflection of his white-clad figure flashed back.

White Kate entering with an old pair of shoes in her hand dropped them to the floor and cried out at the picture: "Gafford! You look like the old 'Point' days!"

Gafford winced at the words. "Don't," he said, sitting down and beginning to put on the shoes. "It's dead, Kate. It's all dead."

"It isn't," she flared back. "It mustn't be. Oh, Gafford, come back!"

He rose, crossed to her, took her hands. "Kate," he questioned, "do you care—really care?"

over her hair before descending, half concealing its dusky mass.

He took the extended hand. "I am so glad you came," she told him. "I've been hoping that you would ever since you said good-by. Shall we sit here or go into the garden?"

"I wanted to come," said Gafford as he bowed above her hand, "and so I found a way. I am a creature of the out-of-doors so suppose we say the garden."

"Come," invited Shieila, and led the way.

In the garden of the Hotel Nippon the artistry of Japanese gardening has reached a climax nowhere excelled. There miniature islands, reached by miniature bridges, bathe in miniature lakes. Dwarf pines make forests on tiny mountains.

Carved pagodas of stone mirror their inverted images in the waters of the lakes. At night soft lanterns glow like fairy marsh-lights among the foliage, where carved benches invite one to rest and dream. Water-lilies, yellow and white, and lily-pads and pink, slumber amid their floating pads. Gold fish flash in crimson darters through transparent pools. The ripple of miniature waterfalls tinkle through the night, with a soothing of weary nerves.

Shieila led Gafford into this cool reality, and bade him take a seat on a bench beside a waterfall.

As she began as she arranged her hair, she began to explain to him the art of this afternoon. I realize that my American independence and my love of adventure placed me in a position from which, save for your assistance, I might never have escaped. I want to assure you that I have learned a lesson, and to thank you again for saving me. She paused, and Gafford could see in the light of a lantern that her lips were quivering.

"Don't speak any more of it, Miss McRae," he hastened to answer. "It is past."

"But I want you to know how I felt this afternoon," she persisted. "I want to make a personal defense of my ignorance. I had heard of geishas, of course, but I didn't know what they were, only in a dim way. I never dreamed—Well, the truth, I hardly knew what to do when we entered that place and Yamata called that almost naked woman to our table and told her to play. I wanted to leave, and had about made up my mind to try it. I was suddenly afraid. The truth is I was dreadfully scared until you came to my rescue. Will you tell me just what Yamata said to the girl who took his order?"

"What does it matter?" Gafford questioned.

"I want to know," said Shieila; "to realize what might have been."

"He told the girl to drug your tea and have a rickshaw ready in the alley at the back of the tea-house," Gafford yielded.

With an impulsive movement she laid her hand on his arm. "I have much to thank you for, my friend," she said.

"Just how did you come to meet the little beggar?" Gafford questioned in turn.

"It was long before last," replied Shieila. "He came up to father in the hotel and called him by name. It seems he is interested in several enterprises in and around San Francisco, and wanted to talk to father about conditions there. Father agreed to meet him after he returned from Tokyo."

"You're father is out of the city?" Gafford took her up.

She laughed slightly. "I shouldn't have said that, really. He returned. Father is really on a diplomatic mission, and supposed to be incognito. My remark was a slip of the tongue. That was in part responsible for my adventure of today, however. I was lonesome and tired of the hotel, and I went out to see what I could do of the town. I was fortunate in finding Lieutenant Gafford, I think."

A stifled gasp at her shoulder told her that her shot had gone home. Her companion's face seemed white in the glow of the lantern as she turned her eyes. Compunction seized her at the effect of her words. She put out her hand.

"Lieutenant," she faltered. "Please—I had to speak—I know your father."

your birthright and den your country yourself."

She felt him quiver beneath her hand, yet he made no answer for some time. A vagrant breeze swayed the lantern until they sent rosy streamers of light fitting like wraiths of dead ambitions, checking across his face. "I wonder if you are right," said the man after a time. "My God! I never thought of it like that."

"Of course not," she hastened to continue. "You didn't look from the other side. You were unjustly accused and unjustly condemned. But because a few mortal men erred in their judgment—did that give you a right to destroy your immortal manhood and forego your divine birthright of land?"

"You believe it was unjustly done—that I was not guilty?" he questioned.

"Yes. Would I have asked you to me else? I am an American girl, Lieutenant. I love my country. That is why."

"I," began Gafford, choked, and paused. He forced himself to go on. "Don't say any more than just that to me now—please," he begged her. "You are making me see. While I have fancied myself a victim, I have been utterly selfish—utterly blind. As long as I was not guilty I should have been stronger than that. My own weakness has made me what I am."

He bowed his head in his hands, sat so for a moment, then dashed clenched fists to his sides and raised a white, drawn face to the light. "How much of my miserable affair do you know?" he asked.

"All of it," she told him. "I told you I knew your father. I have talked with him. When he knew I was coming here he half hoped, I think, that I might meet you. I think your father likes me as much as I do him, for he told me all about this thing. Lieutenant, he is growing an old man."

"Don't," he protested thickly. "It hurts, Miss McRae. I am the last Gafford. Once dad was proud—" "Why don't you write to him?" she said softly.

Gafford rose and stood before her in the glow of the lanterns, drawing himself quite erect. "Shall I tell you?" He spoke harshly. "Well, then—it is because I have gone too low."

"Low?" Shieila drew back from the confession with wide, questioning eyes. "Just what do you mean?"

"All that the word means," he responded in dogged accents. "I am just what Yamata said. I am a lounge, a bum. I frequent the inner rooms of resorts like the House of Moon Faces. I drink sake. I smoke opium. I have no right to even look, let alone talk, to you." Abruptly he turned away.

Shieila rose and swayed to his side. "Yet you came to me today and saved me—a foolish girl, from her folly. And from instinct alone I trusted you. Do you wish me to believe that my intuition was at fault? Lieutenant, a man may do all yet have mentioned and yet win back. It is only we women who are utterly lost if we err—lost as I would have been—but for you."

He swung back to face her almost fiercely. "Do you mean that you think I could—win back?" he asked.

She smiled. "An American and a Gafford? Yes."

"I wonder, I wonder," said Gafford. He sank back on the seat.

"Have you lost your love of country?" he whispered.

"I have denied her for years," he replied.

"That alone proves you love her," her low tones told him. "You denied her because you were ashamed—of yourself. I was the inner voice of the real you which urged you to deny—the self which knew you worthy of better things."

"My God!" breathed the man.

"Oh, I am glad you came to see me!" Shieila rushed on. "When I knew I had found you, and that it was you who had saved me, I was glad—glad! I wanted you to come to me and let me talk to you. My arms were open to you. You were punished, and for years have sulked like a little boy. But now it is time to smile up your face. Sometimes I think that the things we do, and think we do of our own volition, are really the working out of inscrutable design. Perhaps I went to that dreadful place today just in order to meet you and tell you about an old, white-haired man who loves his country and—his boy."

She paused with a break in her voice.

The man beside her trembled. His face twitched. "Love of country!" he said hoarsely. "It is a great thing. All these years I have been trying to kill it out. Tonight you have made it live—you, the first person in five years who has voiced a belief in my innocence! I am an American, Miss McRae. That is the first time I have said it in over four years. I love my country."

"Love her! Why, my people have loved her, fought for her, died for her for years. It is born in me—bred in the bone. And I thought once that I, too, would serve her. I love those stripes of red and white. Through all the years, when I have met them in strange places, my heart has swelled until I cursed because of its pain. I have clenched my hands and gritted my teeth to keep from taking off my hat to it and all it stood for to me. They said I betrayed it. Oh, the fools! Why couldn't they see I was ready to die for it?" He dropped his face on an arm on the back of the bench. His shoulders heaved. "Forgive the display," he said after a bit.

(To be continued)

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